



LIFE AS VOCATION

Notes from the talks by Davide Prospero and Julián Carrón
at the Beginning Day for adults and university students of CL.
Mediolanum Forum, Assago, Italy, September 29, 2012

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JULIÁN CARRÓN

“But when He comes, the Spirit of truth, He will guide you to all truth” (*Jn* 16:13). This is Jesus’ promise, that the Holy Spirit will guide us to the fullness of truth. Why do we have this need? Because the truth is continually threatened by its reduction, that is, by ideology. We, too, always run this risk in our way of looking at reality and at ourselves, in our way of conceiving of ourselves, of conceiving of the Christian event, of living vocation. Not reducing them, and not reducing ourselves, is a grace that we must invoke—beg—from the One whom Christ indicated to us, the Spirit. Only He can bring us to that true self-awareness that we particularly need today. Thus, we will begin our gesture by begging Him.

Come, O Creator Spirit

Il mio volto [My Face]

DAVIDE PROSPERI

I would like to begin by greeting everyone present here in Assago, and all those who are connected via satellite in Italy and abroad.

This year, we have chosen once again to come together as a beginning, and already in this there is a newness that happens again every time, which is given by the Presence that we affirm by gathering once more to take up our journey together. The purpose of this moment is not to indicate a new word but, first of all, to help us not to lose our enthusiasm for the journey. One year ago, here in Assago, Fr. Carrón cited a phrase of Fr. Giussani from 1995: “The root of the question is the constitutive factor of what exists, and the most important word for indicating the most important factor of what exists is the word ‘presence.’ But we are not used to seeing as presence a present leaf, a present flower, a present person; we are not used to fixing as presence the present things” (Milan, February 1, 1995). We are here today to help each other to recognize this presence.

I will start by saying that the most meaningful fact that was given to us to live this year was, without a doubt, the opening of the cause of beatification of Fr. Giussani. It was the most meaningful for us because it is a clear starting point for the awareness of what happened to us in meeting the charism that was given to him. We are called to become aware that what entered the lives of many when

they encountered the experience of the Movement is not exclusively ours, but is for the entire Church and the world.

From this point of view, one thing that became clearer to me this year is precisely a fundamental aspect of the task that we have regarding the charism. It is not about bringing Giussani’s discourse, the contents of his preaching, forward; in fact, what we have lived makes manifest how our contribution is, first of all, in the experience that we live and in the judgment that we give about what happens, because this judgment is continually put to the test, laid bare in its truth, by the circumstances that God gives us to live.

As Fr. Giussani himself reminded us, “The circumstances through which God has us pass are an essential and not a secondary factor of our vocation, of the mission to which He calls us” (L. Giussani, *L’uomo e il suo destino. In cammino [Man and His Destiny: On a Journey]*, Marietti, Genoa, 1999, p. 63). With regard to this, at the Fraternity Exercises, Fr. Carrón pointed out that “the Lord, always present in history, wanted to raise up in the middle of the twentieth century a charism as journey to know Christ, precisely in this cultural situation in which we find ourselves living, because the cultural *humus* that the Enlightenment thinkers introduced into Europe to a large extent determines our way of living reality and living the faith (...which reduces faith to sentiment, devotion, or ethics). For this reason, the story of Fr. Giussani is so significant, because he lived our same circumstances, and had to face the same challenges and the same risks; he himself had to make the same journey...” (J. Carrón, “It Is No Longer I Who Live, But Christ Who Lives in Me,” *Traces*, Fraternity Exercises suppl., Vol. 14, No. 6, 2012, pp. 20-21).

I understand that this is the first mandate that is given to us: to consent to make the same journey, taking it seriously all the way, without leaving anything out. Thus, what makes us certain in this journey is not so much having understood what was said to us (or, worse, thinking that we have understood it), but rather, what makes our steps sure is having been taken hold of, grabbed, attracted by a totalizing experience of truth like the one that fascinated us in encountering this man and all that grew up around him. As Pope Benedict said a few weeks ago in Castel Gandolfo, in a homily to his former students, each of us can reduce faith, Christianity, to a discourse, like a truth that we think we possess, and precisely because of this, we are sometimes accused of intolerance. And he continues: they aren’t wrong when they say this



Orazio Gentileschi, *The Annunciation* (1622), Basilica di San Siro, Genoa, Italy.

to us, because “no one can have the truth. It is the truth that possesses us, it is a living thing [an experience]! We do not possess it, but are held by it. Only if we allow ourselves to be guided and moved by the truth, do we remain in it..., pilgrims of truth” (Benedict XVI, *Homily of the Holy Mass Concluding the Meeting with the “Ratzinger Schülerkreis,”* Castel Gandolfo, September 2, 2012).

Looking back at the contents of last year’s proposal (from the last Beginning Day, through all of the work of the School of Community, to the Fraternity Exercises), we realize that the whole educative trajectory was, first of all, a judgment on the experience that we had, rather than an appeal to a position to be assumed for the future. We lived many circumstances that put us to the test, that challenged us on an original position: either we keep our ties with the root, the origin, of what took hold of us, or it’s become clear that the alternative is the prevalence of an analysis—we become reactive. It’s an irresistible temptation.

Let’s think, for example, about the matter of the economic crisis. We’ve all felt its effects, and how many people, among us as well, were hit hard, and at times faced tremendous damage. And yet, starting precisely from our history, we tried to give an original judgment with the leaflet, “The Crisis, Challenge for Change,” and this judgment was—I would say with surprise—an ongoing factor of presence and encounter with many people who wanted to start again, but even before that, it was a spring that put us in motion. In front of everything that is happening, we said that reality is positive, not because we are naïve,

but because we see many people, among us as well, who witness to us that reality, inasmuch as it is there, just as it is, is a great provocation, the occasion for change—betterment—because it is bigger than we are, and therefore there is hope. Thus, in order to be realists, we cannot expect to reduce what is there to our measure, to what we already know, in order to make ourselves feel safe—we must consent to opening ourselves in order to be able to grow.

Then there was a growing aggression in the Italian media toward CL as such. We saw it, above all, in the newspapers, motivated primarily by the debate about politics, and here, too—we remember it well—Carrón’s letter, published in *La Repubblica* on May 1st, caught everyone off guard, inside and outside of the Movement, because it placed a provocation at the root of the question. We have repeated to ourselves often, this year, Fr. Giussani’s affirmation: “When... the grip of a hostile society tightens around us to the point of threatening the vivacity of our expression, and when a cultural and social hegemony tends to penetrate the heart, stirring up our already natural uncertainties, then *the time of the person has come*” (L. Giussani, “È venuto il tempo della persona” [“The Time of the Person Has Come”], edited by L. Cioni, *Litterae Communionis CL*, No. 1, January 1977, p. 11). In the general context of suspicion, spite, and—let’s just say it—even of lies, in which we have lived and breathed, this letter, published precisely in one of the most bitterly distant newspapers as far as structure of thought is concerned, opened a way for a new gaze, a new possibility to look at circumstances, >>>

» which are given to us for the construction of a greater good. A true judgment is not always immediate, but it is certainly a judgment that moves us. “For this reason—Carrón said in the letter—we have no other reading of these facts but that they are a powerful call to purification and conversion to He who has fascinated us. It is Him, His presence, His untiring knocking on the door of our forgetfulness, of our distraction, that reawakens in us more than before the desire to be His” (J. Carrón, “We Have a Long Way To Go,” *La Repubblica*, May 1, 2012, also in *Traces*, 2012, Vol. 14, No 5, p. 1). There is no judgment in the world that can defeat the affirmation of who we are: we are His.

At Christmastime, a friend was telling me that, one day, her daughter came home from middle school somewhat troubled. They had had the annual Christmas party, and the girl had been moved by one of her classmates who had lost his father. The girl said, “Mom, I don’t know if I could be happy, if I were in his place,” because she often saw him happy—even at the party he had been happy. So her mother, as mothers usually do, immediately tried to “fix things” by explaining that the mother of that boy was a great woman, that he won’t be lacking in anything, etc. But all of these explanations, which were certainly true, were not enough for the daughter, because she had seen something even truer; in her childish simplicity, she had looked deeper—she had been wounded. The Mystery had opened a gap and she had looked through it. She had glimpsed in that classmate an extraordinary greatness, unimaginable; she had seen that he had a destiny (we are made for happiness), and so she had immediately asked the question about herself, because she, too, had a destiny.

And we had the Rimini Meeting this summer, to try to say what this destiny is: man’s nature—his consistency, the reason why he gets up every morning and engages in all of the challenges that he must face, his greatness—is his relation to the infinite.

So we can see that God gave us this year to make us more aware of what we are, of the ideal to which we are attached and for which we live, and He made it clear to us through the circumstances that He gave us, even those that are perhaps not always immediately desirable.

Precisely because of this, in starting the year, we ask you: What does everything that happened to us mean? What allows us to learn to see what is inside circumstances, and that we often have such a hard time seeing? We feel this to be particularly urgent because, without being able to recognize the true consistency of things, it is very difficult to travel the path to fulfillment of one’s human destiny.

JULIÁN CARRÓN

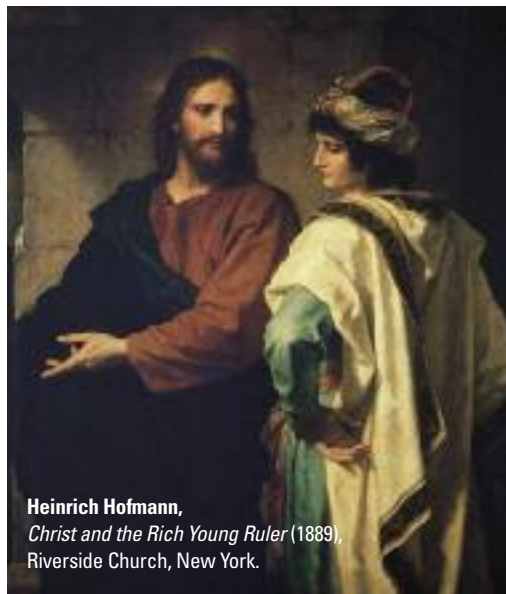
First of all, I hope that each of you will go back to what Davide just said, because it is a witness of what it means to make a journey; it is a synthesis of the road we have traveled, which helps us all to fix it in our memory with awareness, so that it won’t get lost.

He asks me, what does everything that has happened to us, and that continues to happen to us, have to do with the need to learn to see what is inside circumstances, and that we often have such a hard time seeing? We feel this to be particularly urgent because, without being able to recognize the true consistency of things, it is very difficult to travel the path to the fulfillment of

one’s human destiny.

I. CONSISTENCY AND CIRCUMSTANCES

The struggle to perceive what is inside circumstances has to do with the “cultural and social hegemony [that] tends to penetrate the heart” (L. Giussani, “È venuto il tempo della persona,” op. cit., p. 11) of each one of us. It is striking that Benedict XVI—and he doesn’t give in on this point—in addressing the Italian Episcopal Conference, started precisely from here, from this reduction, which is not without consequences. “In fact, not only do scientific rationality and the technological culture tend to homogenize the world, but they also often exceed their respective specific spheres, claiming to outline the perimeter of the certainties of reason with the sole empirical criterion of their own breakthroughs. Thus the power of human skills ends by considering itself the yardstick for action.... The profound value of the spiritual and moral patrimony in which the West has put down roots, and which is its lifeblood, is no longer understood, to the point that people no longer



Heinrich Hofmann,
Christ and the Rich Young Ruler (1889),
Riverside Church, New York.

grasp its authoritative truth. Even a fertile land thus risks becoming an inhospitable desert, and the promising good seed is in danger of being crushed, trodden on, and lost” (*Address to the General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference*, May 24, 2012).

But how can this reduction of reason be challenged? It is challenged by reality, by circumstances, as Fr. Giussani—keep this always in mind—told us in the tenth chapter of *The Religious Sense*: the questions of reason are awakened in the impact with reality. “Life is this interweaving of circumstances that, in besieging you, touch you and provoke you (‘provoke’—here is the root of the most beautiful Christian word about life: ‘vocation’)” (L. Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose. 1979-1981* [*Certain of a Few Great Things (1979-1981)*], Bur, Milan, 2007, p. 387).

There are many witnesses of this, but I will read only a few of them.

“I work as a psychologist in a hospital, and I deal in particular with pregnancy issues. A woman and her husband tried to have children for a long time, and last February the long-awaited pregnancy finally began. One month later, the woman was diagnosed with cancer. The doctors didn’t give her any hope of survival, and she was advised to terminate the pregnancy. Before meeting her, one of the obstetricians told me they avoided this woman’s room as much as possible, because the burden was too heavy to bear. And a gynecologist said, ‘I try to go in only for absolute necessities, because the ending has already been written.’ The first time that I met this woman, I gave her the usual speech about the services that the hospital offers, but I stayed just for a short time because of the uneasiness I felt. The next visit, I spent more time with her. She told me about herself, the acute physical pain she was in, the difficult time she was having in understanding how, after a miracle (getting pregnant, which she had so strongly desired), she could have been given a punishment (the cancer). The longer I stayed with her, the more my usual professional competence proved to be insufficient to the situation. I couldn’t find any excuses, while her same questions opened up inside me, her same cry, which I brought with me when I left the room. And I started to realize that my abilities were not the issue here. There was something more [we think we can get by with our scientific rationality, but reality pushes us, challenges us, reawakening the same question: there is something more!]. That sick, pregnant woman

Circumstances, good or bad—all of them—are ways through which the Mystery calls us. They are not, as we so often interpret them according to our measure, burdens that we must put up with. They have a very specific purpose in God’s design.

placed in front of me, once more, all of my needy humanity within my professional role.”

The reason for the value of circumstances is simple: “God does nothing by chance” (L. Giussani, *Qui e ora. 1984-1985* [*Here and Now (1984-1985)*], Bur, Milan, 2009, p. 446). This is the only true reading of reality, of circumstances. Forget about all of our theories (upon which we so often linger, until we tire of them)! Circumstances, good or bad—all of them—are ways through which the Mystery calls us. They are not, as we so often interpret them according to our measure (that is, our rationalism), bur-

dens that we must put up with. They have a very specific purpose in God’s design. What purpose?

We can understand well if we start from the conception of reality that Fr. Giussani never tired of communicating and witnessing to us. Let’s reread what he said when faced with an even more dramatic challenge than that of today—when, in the late 1960s, the Movement was decimated: “In the life of those He calls, God never lets anything happen unless it serves for the growth and maturation of those He has called. This is so above all for the life of the individual, but in the final analysis, and more profoundly, for the life of His Church, and therefore,

analogously, for the life of every community.... God never permits anything to happen unless it is for our maturity, our maturation. In fact [here is the test that Giussani proposes to verify if we are becoming more mature], the truth of the faith is demonstrated precisely by the capacity of each of us and of every ecclesiastical reality (family, community, parish, and the Church in general) to valorize what appears to be an obstacle, persecution, or difficulty as a road to maturity, by the capacity to make it an instrument and moment of maturation” (L. Giussani, “The Long March to Maturity,” *Traces*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2008, p. 1).

In what, therefore, does our maturation consist? It is the maturation of our self-awareness, it is the generation of a subject who is able to have consistency in the midst of all of the events of life. Because circumstances introduce a struggle: “It is the struggle that keeps us awake, and this struggle is the normal fabric of life: it keeps us awake, that is, it matures our awareness of what is our consistency or our dignity, which is an Other” (L. Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose. 1979-1981*, op. cit., p. 389). Circumstances, therefore, are given to us in order for the awareness of what our consistency is to mature in us, so that we truly become aware that our consistency is an Other. >>

» In order to see the method with which we usually approach these challenges, all we have to do is make a comparison with the song that we just sang, “*Il mio volto*” (“My Face”), and let ourselves be struck by it. Because—I’ve often thought recently—it would be almost impossible that one of us write this song today... “My God, I look at myself and discover that I am faceless. / I look into my depths and see endless darkness [verify what we do when we see endless darkness, how we approach it, how we react, how we get agitated, and then compare that with what the song says]. // Only when I realize that You exist / do I hear my voice again / like an echo / and I’m born again” (A. Mascagni, “*Il mio volto*,” *Canti*, Coop. Ed. Nuovo Mondo, Milan, 2007, p. 203). How many times, when faced with darkness, do we find ourselves taking the path that the song describes? And, instead, how many times do we reach the darkness and get agitated, searching for a confirmation outside of experience, in order to cling to something? This is why I ask: who would be able to compose a song like this today? Imagine, instead, that if every time that one were in darkness, he did what the song says: looked into the depths, without settling for a reduced use of reason, until he recognized the You that is at the bottom of all darkness. What self-awareness he would gain every time! What a capacity to live in the truth of himself, not constantly determined by the darkness, not having constantly to flee from the darkness, because he encountered there—in the depths of the darkness, in the depths of reality, in the depths of himself—that which constitutes him! And what is the sign? Not that I have other thoughts or other feelings. No! I recognize it by a real fact: that I am reborn.

We can see it in this letter: “Dearest Fr. Julián: In following, life becomes more fascinating every day. Every instant in which I become aware of who I am and of the relationship with the Lord, who alone makes me steadfast and happy, becomes the possibility to walk toward my fulfillment. I am a housewife and mother of three young children. I have never felt oppressed by the unavoidable solitude of my life, or by the hardship of work that is not visible to the public eye, like changing diapers and preparing baby food. Giving credit to the truthfulness of what you often tell us (and what Fr. Giussani always told us), that a sense of suffocation or deceit appears on the horizon of my daily life, I happen to think about you, about my ‘I,’ about Who is making it now; then I immediate-

ly discover the unique and great relationship that is at the core of my being, and everything falls into its appointed place again and I breathe the fresh air of my freedom, the fresh air of His presence. I just want to thank you, because in these past years, I have really begun to know and follow Fr. Giussani, and because not a day goes by without my asking for every circumstance—I dare say even my sin—to become the possibility for me to take another certain and conscious step toward my destiny. This is my great hope for myself, my loved ones, and the whole world.”

So do you understand why circumstances are an essential part of vocation? Because they challenge us, because if I weren’t sometimes in the darkest darkness, then I could live without becoming aware of the Mystery, without the need to become truly aware of what I am and of the fact that He is, and thus be reborn. “Self-awareness is the capacity to reflect on oneself deep down [which does not mean psychological introspection]. But if one reflects on himself deep down, in a totally aware way, then he en-

counters an Other, because in saying ‘I in a totally aware way, I realize that I don’t make myself’ (Gathering of Priests, September 9-16, 1967, La Verana, Italy, CL Archive). And when do I realize that I didn’t stop halfway, that I have reached this Other? Through reasoning? Through feeling? By convincing myself? I realize it when I am reborn!

I ask myself: during all of this period in which we were greatly challenged by circumstances, how many times were we forced to walk this path, to the point of being reborn in the recognition of the You? I confess that I had to do it an in-

finite number of times; otherwise, I assure you that I would no longer be here. Someone can be on the other side of the world, and he receives an e-mail with the latest article that is attacking us harshly, and there is no room for flight: either he lets himself be determined by the reaction, and reduced to this for the whole day, or he starts to walk this path, and he recognizes once again that he is not what the newspapers say, but a relationship with One who makes him. In front of every circumstance and every challenge, which are constant, I am forced to decide if I will remain at the level of complaining or if I will look at the challenge as the possibility through which the Mystery calls me to renew my self-awareness.

The problem is not that they take the darkness away, or that they spare us certain attacks; “[o]ur true problem is to leave our immaturity behind” (L. Giussani, “The Long

In what does our maturation consist? It is the maturation of our self-awareness, it is the generation of a subject who is able to be consistent in the midst of all of the events of life. “It is the struggle that keeps us awake, and this struggle is the normal fabric of life.”



Federico Barocci, *Christ and the Fishermen* (1580-1583), Real Monastero de San Lorenzo, El Escorial, Spain.

March to Maturity,” op. cit.), that is, to begin to say “I” as men who are truly aware of what they are. That is why it is the time of the person. Our immaturity is not generated—as we sometimes think—by others, or by circumstances, or by the attacks that we find ourselves facing. Don’t get confused—the others don’t have the power to generate our immaturity; they only reveal what is already there, they make us aware that we don’t have consistency. They make us discover that we are often more determined by circumstances than by self-awareness. So the problem is not complaining about circumstances—we lose so much time in sterile complaining!—but leaving our immaturity behind.

The Lord wants to help us leave our immaturity behind by generating a subject that has consistency enough to challenge any darkness, any circumstance, any problem. Otherwise, we wouldn’t stay in reality, we would try to flee—as we see happen around us: doctors no longer enter the rooms of their patients because there is too much reality to be able to face it. And we think that we can face all of these challenges without having consistency?

And so a different gaze toward circumstances is introduced, and we understand what the meaning of life as vocation is. “Living vocation means tending toward the destiny for which life is made. This destiny is Mystery; it cannot be described and imagined. It is determined by the same Mystery that gives us life. Living life as vo-

cation means tending toward the Mystery in the circumstances through which the Lord has us pass, by responding to them.... Vocation is going toward destiny, embracing all the circumstances through which destiny has us pass” (L. Giussani, *Realtà e giovinezza. La sfida [Reality and Youth: The Challenge]*, SEI, Turin, 1995, pp. 49-50), not the circumstances that we choose—as if we could decide—but all of them.

That the Lord makes us walk toward destiny through adverse circumstances is something mysterious, as the Bible constantly reminds us: “Your ways are not My ways” (Is 55:8). When we pay attention, we realize that this, paradoxically, is so suitable for the generation of a subject, that without it we would get lost in absolute banality, in superficial distraction, in tremendous reduction. All of the circumstances through which the Mystery has us walk toward destiny are there to reawaken our human subject, in such a way as to have the strength to live any circumstance. It is the verification of faith—the verification of the Christian event—when Christianity is able to generate a subject that has a consistency, not outside of reality, not in our room, but in reality as it challenges us. And what is the energy, what is the strength of the “I”? Where is it found? The strength of the “I” lies only in its self-awareness. Thus, all of the circumstances through which the Lord has us pass are there to mature in us “*self-awareness*, a clear and lov- ➤

» ing perception of self, charged with awareness of one's destiny and thus capable of true affection for self, freed from the instinctive obtuseness of self-love. If we lose this identity, nothing is of help to us" (L. Giussani, "È venuto il tempo della persona," op. cit., p. 12).

2. THE ELEMENTS OF OUR SELF-AWARENESS

The Pope reminded us of the elements of our self-awareness in his message to the Rimini Meeting in August.

a. Original dependence: "We are made"

"Speaking of man and of his desire for the infinite means first of all recognizing his constitutive relationship with the Creator. Man is a creature of God [we all know these phrases, we all know them, me too, but if we don't rediscover them by responding to circumstances, then they stay there in the drawer of our useless knowledge, and then we are all caught off-guard by circumstances; because of this, I ask you (as I ask of myself) not to succumb to the temptation of thinking that we already know it. We don't know! Otherwise we would live with an intensity that we often dream of in daily life]. Today this word-creature-seems almost to have gone out of fashion. People prefer to think of the human being as a being complete in himself and the absolute master of his own destiny. Viewing man as a creature seems 'reductive,' because it involves an essential reference to something else, or rather, Someone else—who cannot be managed by man—who comes into it to define his identity in an essential way; a relational identity, whose first given is his original and ontological dependence on the One who wanted and created us." No circumstance, no power, no attack, can take this away from us, because it constitutes the truth of us more than our thoughts, our feelings, our reactions, or other people. Other people do not define what we are; we are this original dependence, and when we are not aware of this original dependence, then we are at the mercy of everyone—we see it at work, in relationships, with friends, reading the newspapers, when we are alone. And yet, insists Benedict XVI, "this dependence, from which modern and contemporary men and women seek to free themselves, not only does not conceal or diminish, but rather reveals clearly the greatness and supreme dignity of the human



El Greco, *The Miracle of Christ Healing the Blind* (1570), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

being, called to life to enter into a relationship with Life itself, with God" (Benedict XVI, *Message for the 33rd Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples* [Rimini, August 19-25, 2012], August 10, 2012).

"But what about original sin?" we often ask ourselves.

The Pope goes on, "Moreover, original sin is ultimately rooted precisely in our first parents' evasion from this constitutive relationship, in their desire to put themselves in God's place, in their belief that they could do without Him. Even after their sin, however, human beings are left with this all-consuming desire for this dialogue [that is, the desire to breathe, the desire to emerge from the bunker], almost as if the Creator Himself had branded their soul and their flesh with it.... 'O God, You are my God, I seek

You, my soul thirsts for You; my flesh faints for You, as in a dry and weary land where no water is'.... Not only my soul, but every fiber of my flesh is made to find its peace, its fulfillment, in God. And this aspiration in the human heart is indelible: even when God is rejected or denied, the thirst for the infinite that dwells in men and women is not slaked. Instead, a frantic, sterile search for 'false infinities' begins, that can satisfy them at least for a moment" (Ibid.). We are constituted by this Mystery who loves us, in such a way that not even we, with all of our evil, can reduce this thirst. And so this thirst cries, cries, cries out for Him, cries that there is something in me that

resists, that remains, beyond all of my distractions, beyond all of my evil, beyond all of my confusion. Tell me if this thirst doesn't remain. It is the sign of something irreducible, a given: we are made for the infinite. This is our destiny.

This given is the first element of our self-awareness, of a clear and loving perception of self. Original dependence constitutes the truth of ourselves: we are the fruit of an act of love by God. We are! And no mistake, no distraction, no circumstance, no pain can cancel the fact that I exist. And if I exist, the Mystery who makes me is crying out to me, by the fact of my existence: "You are an act of My love. You are made for Me now, you are made in My image and likeness." And so this phrase that we all "know" acquires its full importance, this phrase that would let us breathe, if we became aware of it: "God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him" (*Gen 1:27*). This, Fr. Giussani tells us, is the foundation of affection for oneself

(and we, many times, go begging for the crumbs that fall from the table of the powerful!). “Affection for ourselves cannot be motivated by *what we are*; it is motivated by the *fact that we are*, it is the surprise of oneself as gift from something else, as grace, as surprise of being, as made of another. If the first thing that God does is to love you, what is the most immediate imitation of God? Imitation of God is the surprise of loving oneself, of wanting oneself” (discussion with *Memores Domini*, October 8, 1983, *pro manuscripto*). “If one does not have love, tenderness, for himself, then he does not imitate God in anything; if one does not imitate God in loving, then he cannot imitate God, because the first and fundamental thing with which God reveals Himself to man, who is made in His image and likeness, the first likeness with God is to love oneself. Because the first thing that God does is to love you” (discussion with *Memores Domini*, May 3, 1987, *pro manuscripto*).

Each of us can make the comparison between the awareness that he has of himself and what Fr. Giussani says—not in order to complain about the consistency we still don’t have, but in order to taste a promise, to rediscover the possibility not to lose what we are saying to each other.

b. The Christian event: “We are His”

Another fact has happened to us, which constitutes the second element of our self-awareness and answers a question that we, too, often ask ourselves. The Pope formulated it like this: “Is it not perhaps structurally impossible for human beings to measure up to the loftiness of their nature? This question brings us directly to the heart of Christianity. In fact, the Infinite One took a finite form in order to make Himself a response that the human being could [look what verb he uses!] experience. The unbridgeable abyss between the finite and the infinite was filled from the Incarnation, from the moment in which the Word became flesh; the eternal and infinite God left His heaven and entered into time, He immersed Himself in human finiteness” (Benedict XVI, *Message for the 33rd Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, op. cit.).

How does each one of us know that it happened precisely like this, that this is not just meaningless babble?

We know because we, too, like John and Andrew, were taken hold of, to the point that each of us can say: I was never so much myself as when You happened to me. This is the content of experiencing Christ. The second given of

the content of my self-awareness, therefore, is Christ who happened to me in life, who made me experience myself with an intensity, a greatness, a fullness that I am unable to reproduce with all of my attempts. The content of my self-awareness, of my perception of myself, is that my “I” is You, Christ. You are me, You are my true “I.” Because of this, we can synthesize the content of my self-awareness by using St. Paul’s words: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (*Gal 2:20*). Each one of us can look and see to what extent this self-awareness of Christ dominates his days, or if it is rather a phrase carved on the wall, which has no real content of experience.

The Pope reminds us of the joy and gratitude that invaded the life of the first Christians. “In fact, in early Christianity it was like this: being free from the shadow of groping along in ignorance—What am I? Why am I? How should I move forward?—being made free, being in the light, in the fullness of the truth. This was the fundamental awareness. A gratitude that radiated around and united people in the Church of Jesus Christ” (Benedict XVI, *Homily of the Holy Mass Concluding the Meeting with the “Ratzinger Schülerkreis,”* op. cit.). We all know how much Giussani was dominated by this awareness, to the point of causing Cardinal Martini to say, “Every time that you talk, you always return to this core, which is the Incarnation, and—in a thousand different ways—you propose it again” (C.M. Martini, cited in J. Carrón, “Carrón: I am saddened; we could have collaborated more,” *Corriere*

della Sera, September 4, 2012; also in *Traces*, 2012, Vol. 14, No 8, p.46). What it was, every time, to hear him talk!

At this point, the Pope concludes, “Nothing, therefore, [after the Incarnation] is trivial or insignificant in the journey of life and of the world. Men and women are made for an infinite God who became flesh, who took on our humanity to uplift it to the heights of His divine being.” He goes on to say—and this is amazing—“We thus discover the truest dimension of human existence to which the Servant of God Luigi Giussani ceaselessly called people: life as vocation. Everything, every relationship, every joy, as well as every difficulty, finds its ultimate reason in being an opportunity for a relationship with the Infinite, God’s voice that continually calls us and invites us to look up, to discover in adherence to Him the complete fulfillment of our humanity” (Benedict XVI, *Message for the 33rd Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, op. cit.). ➤➤

In front of every circumstance I am forced to decide if I will remain at the level of complaining or if I will look at the challenge as the possibility through which the Mystery calls me. The problem is not that they take the darkness away; “our true problem is to leave our immaturity behind.”

» Do you understand? Living life as vocation is walking toward destiny through everything, which is no longer banal and insignificant, but acquires the capacity to recall us to self-awareness. Circumstances are given to us in order to reawaken this self-awareness, not because circumstances can give us what we said (the fact of existing and the fact that Christ happens to us), but because circumstances help us to discover carnally, experientially, what Christ means and what the fact that I exist means, because the Lord has us walk toward destiny through all of the circumstances that He makes happen. Thus, “we must not be afraid of what God asks of us through life’s circumstances” (Ibid.).

The Lord calls everyone to recognize the essence of his or her own nature as human beings, made for the infinite. And this is what Revelation documents, that all that is given to us is given for our maturation, so that we may grow in this self-awareness. That is why this is the time of the person, the time of each one of us, because each of us is called, through very particular circumstances, to respond to Christ who is calling. And responding to the situation and the provocation is impossible, if we don’t put all of ourselves at stake—because only the person can resist succumbing to this situation, precisely because of the nature of the “I.” What is at stake in all of this is the fierce struggle not to reduce the “I” to all of the antecedent factors.

3. THE ROAD TO CERTAINTY

Saint Paul documents this in a spectacular way. The encounter with Christ left its mark on his life, too, so much so that it turned upside-down everything that he considered a value. “For we are the circumcision, we who worship through the Spirit of God, who boast in Christ Jesus and do not put our confidence in flesh, although I myself have grounds for confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he can be confident in flesh, all the more can I. Circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee, in zeal I persecuted the Church, in righteousness based on the law I was blameless. But whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not

having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the sharing of His sufferings by being conformed to His death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:3-11).

But even for Paul, who had this clarity about Christ, nothing was spared. On the contrary, just look at the circumstances that he had to face: “Five times at the hands of the Jews I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day on the deep; on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and

thirst, through frequent fastings, through cold and exposure. And apart from these things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor 11:24-28). It’s astounding! But in all that the Lord had him pass through, what emerged more and more powerfully in St. Paul’s awareness? That “we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus,

so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. Since, then, we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, ‘I believed, therefore I spoke,’ we too believe and therefore speak, knowing that the One who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and place us with you in His presence. Everything indeed is for you, so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God” (2 Cor 4:7-15).

All that is given to him is for him, in order to better know Jesus, the power of His resurrection, the power of the One to whom he had entrusted his life. This is a humanity that is completely overflowing with gratitude, born from an even greater awareness, because the Mystery did not spare Paul anything. These circumstances, which are part of Rev-

That the Lord makes us walk toward destiny through adverse circumstances is something mysterious. It is so suitable for the generation of a subject, that without it we would get lost in absolute banality.



Sicilian School, *Christ Healing a Sick Woman* (Romanesque), Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

elation—St. Paul’s letters are part of Revelation, they are not anecdotes or decorative additions—tell us God’s method: God does not spare us anything so that this boundless gratitude can grow. Thus, living life as vocation with this awareness (that is, that we hold this content in earthen vessels) is the way not to be crushed by our obtuseness and opacity, so that the certainty of Christ can become ever more ours. We will not challenge our “ideas” about Christ unless He Himself constantly breaks through our reduction, making us experience who He is.

Paul also describes the outcome of this method: the certainty acquired. “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but handed Him over for us all, how will He not also give us everything else along with Him? Who will bring a charge against God’s chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written: ‘For Your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom* 8:31-39).

If we are not victorious in the midst of the whole cul-

tural hegemony situation in which we are called to live, what is the reasonableness of faith? Why would it be reasonable to believe in Christ? Instead, if here, precisely here, in the midst of all that we are saying, all that we are living, all of the challenges that we find ourselves facing, we see that we are more than victorious in Him (not by our own merit, but because Christ loved us), this generates a consistency that is unique. The conviction that St. Paul talks about is the certainty of self-awareness. Who doesn’t desire at least a little of this certainty? So, it is only if we see the contemporaneousness of Christ at work that we are truly victorious. To be victorious does not mean “to take power.” To be victorious means to see Christ’s victory, even if we are stripped of everything. To be victorious means to be overflowing with His presence.

This is why we have to decide where it is that we find the response to the desire for happiness that we discover in ourselves, because we are made for the infinite. Only in this way will we be able to collaborate in the mission of the Church, which “is not the persistence of proselytism, but a testimony that lets the attractiveness of Christ shine through; it is the longing that everyone be saved,” as Cardinal Scola reminded us in his recent pastoral letter (*A. Scola, Alla scoperta del Dio vicino [Discovering God Who is Near]*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milan, 2012, p. 31).

Faced with witnesses like St. Paul, we can see what Christ can become for us, in such a way that, even in the most pressing circumstances, the content of our self-awareness fills us more and more with silence, urges the memory of Christ within us as the most precious, most desir- ➤

» able thing to which to devote time, space, our heart. If this desire for memory does not continually grow in us, if we don't find ourselves desiring this silence in order to give space to memory, then we are already defeated, because we have given in on the content of self-awareness, and therefore we have emptied it of what happened to us, and let it be filled with whatever the powers that be want. To be in silence is to live this awareness of Christ; it is the capacity to think and to invoke Christ.

This is why, in order to learn to pray, we must love silence, that is, the profound feeling of self as a person on the road toward a destination, which is the mystery of Christ. This silence must become mature, ever more mature and great. If we do not start to do what we usually do differently, if silence is not becoming aware of oneself in order to fill up our person (which is sometimes already full of all of the distractions, all of the preoccupations, all of the things to do), if we do not give space to becoming aware of ourselves once more, then we will be swept away by everything else. Silence is becoming aware, once again, of one's own relationship with the great presence of the mystery of the Father.

This is how we can then face reality with Him in our eyes, in our consciousness—like the man born blind. Christ does not heal the man born blind and then take him out of reality for fear that he might lose what was given to him. No. Jesus launches that man into the fray, with that Presence that healed him in his eyes; He doesn't take him out of it. I mean: Christ generates an "I" that is capable of living reality, like the blind man who had the simplicity to recognize that before he couldn't see and now he can. His awareness was determined by what happened to him. With this self-awareness, he can face everyone, not because he is more powerful, but because of this simplicity in adhering to what happened to him. This is the power of self-awareness—and in someone random, not one of Jesus' disciples!—and all of the scholars among the Pharisees could do nothing with respect to an "I" that had this self-awareness.

Thus, we can face any circumstance, as a very dear friend witnessed to us in facing death, in a dialogue that she had with her husband (who then wrote to me about it) when she learned what was to happen: "She said to me, 'I'm calm, I'm not afraid, because Jesus is here. Now I'm not even worried about you and the children anymore, because I know that you are in the hands of an Other.' And I asked,

'But aren't you sad?' 'No, I'm not sad. I'm certain of Christ; indeed, I'm curious about what will happen to me, what the Lord is preparing for me. Maybe I should be sad, but I'm not. I'm only sorry that your trial is greater than mine.' 'Come on.' 'Of course, the opposite would have been better.' And I said to her, smiling because I was already incredibly comforted by the miracle I had just seen, 'It's really true, especially for the children.' This was, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful moments of the 17 years (12 of marriage and 5 of dating) that we spent together—if not the most beautiful." With a consistency like this, one can look at everything, even the threshold of destiny.

We have a witness to whom nothing was spared: Fr. Giussani. "The Lord is my strength and my song" (*Ex* 15:2): "When we say this, we are not saying it with our eyes wide open and filled with the presence of others! We say this word and we repeat this phrase with the presence of Christ in our eyes, which is the truth of all that is here, the ultimate truth of all that is here, 'Everything consists in Him.'... 'My strength,' and thus my weapon in battle, and 'my song,' that is, my sweetness, which remains in battle, the beauty that pulls me into battle and that sustains me, whether the battle lasts an hour or 100 days. Indeed, there is a battle that lasts my whole life: that in living, I keep Jesus present! Our friendship promises us this: help in growing, in advancing, in walking behind this memory, holy God, it is a promise within every battle. While the battle rages, through all the time in our

lives that is struggle and toil, it promises us to enter more and more into the *You*, because the 'You' is a present: 'You are my strength and my song.' May this *You* coincide with His face, with His name. His name is a Presence in all of its strength and suggestiveness, power and sweetness" (L. Giussani, *L'attrattiva Gesù [The Attraction of Jesus]*, Bur, Milan, 1999, pp. 184-185).

Thus—with this in our eyes—we can prepare ourselves to begin, on October 11th, in the great companionship of all the Church, the Year of Faith that the Pope called for, "in order to rediscover and to receive once again this precious gift which is faith, in order to have a deeper knowledge of the truths that are our lifeblood, to lead the people of today, who are often distracted, to a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ, 'the way, the life, and the truth'" (Benedict XVI, *Address to the General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference*, op. cit.).

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